

# Tips for interacting with people with disabilities

## How to read and use this guide

You most likely know or will interact with someone with a disability, such as a coworker, friend, family member, acquaintance, etc. Although this guide offers tips on interacting with people who have various types of disabilities, the disability community is rapidly evolving to use identity-first language in place of person-first language, viewing disability as a core component of identity, much like race and gender. However, some members of the community, such as people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, prefer person-first language.

In the same way, some people in the disabilities community now find the term “special needs” offensive, saying the euphemism has become stigmatized in the same way that the term “handicapped” has and prefer the term “disability.” However, the term is still used in the legal industry (special needs trust), finance (special needs planning) and education (special education), as well as others.

Voya Cares regularly monitors the pulse of the disabilities community and attempts to adjust language, as appropriate. This guide reflects a common sense approach to marrying industry language with the preferences of the families that make up the disabilities community.



## A sign of the times

The term “handicapped” is being updated with the preferred term “accessible”. Look for signs that say accessible parking and accessible access.

## Preferred terms to use when discussing disabilities

### *Visible disabilities*

**Use:** Person with disabilities

**Not:** Cripple, handicapped, handicap, invalid (literally means “not valid”)

**Use:** Uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user

**Not:** Restricted or confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound

**Use:** Non-disabled, typical/able-bodied, or typically developing

**Not:** Normal (referring to non-disabled people as “normal” insinuated that people with disabilities are abnormal.)

**Use:** Little people, people of short stature, having dwarfism

**Not:** Midget

### *Non-visible disabilities*

**Use:** Deaf, hard of hearing, hearing impaired

**Not:** Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb

**Use:** Epilepsy, seizures

**Not:** Fits

**Use:** Psychiatric history, mental health issues, psychiatric disability, emotional disorder, mental illness

**Not:** Crazy, insane, mental patient, wacko, a lunatic, a psychotic, schizophrenic

**Use:** Learning disability, intellectual disability, developmental disability, cognitive disability, ADHD

**Not:** Mental retardation, slow, retarded, lazy, stupid, underachiever

## Terms to avoid

These terms should be avoided, because they have negative connotations and tend to evoke pity and fear:

- abnormal
- afflicted
- burden
- condition
- deformed
- differently abled
- disfigured
- handicapable
- handicapped
- incapacitated
- imbecile
- manic
- maimed
- madman
- moron
- palsied
- pathetic
- physically challenged
- pitiful
- retard
- spastic
- stricken with
- suffers
- tragedy
- unfortunate
- victim

## Disability etiquette: basic guidelines

Think differently when interacting with a person with a disability:

- If the disability isn't relevant to the story or conversation, don't mention it.
- Remember, a person who has a disability isn't necessarily chronically sick or unhealthy.
- A person is not a diagnosis, so avoid describing a person, as such. Don't introduce someone as "autistic." Instead, say, "a person with autism."

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## Common courtesies

Below are examples of how to interact with a person with a disability in a considerate and tactful manner:

- Don't feel obligated to act as a helper to people with disabilities. Ask if help is needed, but always wait until your offer is accepted. Listen to any instructions the person may have.
- If you shake hands with people you meet, offer your hand to everyone you meet. If the person is unable to shake your hand, he or she will tell you.
- Leaning on a person's wheelchair is like leaning or hanging on a person. The chair is part of a person's personal body space; do not hang on it.
- When aiding a person with a visual impairment, allow that person to take your arm. This will enable you to guide, rather than propel or lead the person. Use specific directions, such as "left in 10 feet," when directing a person with a visual impairment.
- Resist the temptation to pet or talk to a guide or service animal.
- Be considerate of possible pain, balance or post-traumatic stress concerns during physical contact.

## Conversations

Here are more in-depth tips for day-to-day conversations:

- If you don't understand what the person is saying, ask the person to repeat what they said and then repeat it back to ensure understanding.
- With individuals who are blind or have low vision, identify yourself when entering a conversation and announce when you leave.
- To get the attention of a person who is hearing impaired, tap him or her on the shoulder or wave. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if he or she reads lips. Not all people with hearing loss can read lips. Those who do, rely on facial expressions and body language for understanding.